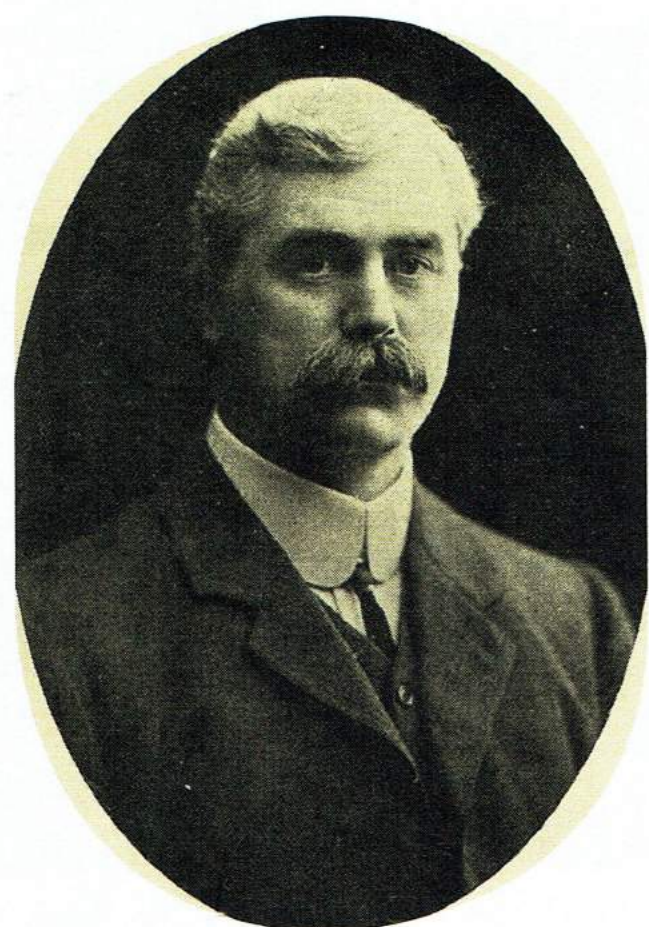


Celebrating 100 years – James Thompson, the founding President of the WA Institution of Engineers

THOMPSON, James BE, MICE, JP (1863 – 1945),
Engineer-in-Chief Public Works Department WA 1904 – 1925



James Thompson, BE, MICE

Engineering Heritage Panel

James Thompson was born on 22 August 1863 at Drogheda, County Louth, Ireland, son of Thomas Thompson, supervisor, and his wife Mary Henderson, née Logan. The family moved to Cork in 1870 where young James was educated at Carmichael School and Queen's College (Royal University of Ireland, B.E., 1882). In 1882 he was appointed assistant to Dr Stoney, engineer to the Dublin Docks and Harbours Board, and until 1889 worked on railway and harbour projects in England and Ireland.

On 22 December 1888 Thompson married Sarah Highet (who died at Cottesloe on 22.11.1900 aged 37) at Trinity Church, Cork. They were to have one son, Thomas J L Thompson, who had a highly distinguished career in the Royal Army Medical Corps and was awarded the Military Cross, an OBE and the US Legion of Merit.

They migrated in 1889 to Melbourne where James was employed as an assistant engineer in the survey branch of the Victorian Railways. He joined the Public Works Department of Western Australia in 1891 and assisted C Y O'Connor in designs of works and preparation of railways contracts. In 1894 Thompson became resident engineer on the Northam-Southern Cross-Kalgoorlie railway and in June 1896 he was appointed engineer in charge of the Railway Construction Branch. In 1898 he was also made engineer-in-charge of the Harbours and Rivers Branch.

In October 1896 Thompson was severely injured in a rail accident at East Northam and was immobilised for several months. Working from his Brisbane St house, he had a telephone installed to his room to be able to continue working.

Thompson had a keen interest in race horses and in January 1898 on the way to the races overturned his two horse buggy in soft sand in Bennett Street when the horses bolted. Thompson was slightly injured but there was great concern that one his passengers, a Mr T S Lodge from York, could have received a spinal injury.

In 1904 Thompson visited the eastern states to inspect light railways which had been built in several states. Subsequently he was responsible for the construction of about 500 miles of low cost railways in the wheatbelt.

In September 1904 after six months acting in the position, he was appointed engineer-in-chief of the Public Works Department. He was the third "Chief" following on from Charles Stuart Russell Palmer who in turn had succeeded Charles Yelverton O'Connor.

During his term, work was completed on metropolitan water supply and sewerage and drainage projects (1904-12), Fremantle Harbour and extensions to Victoria Quay (1908), extensions to North Quay and consequent dredging (1914-15), harbours and rivers improvements at Albany, Bunbury, Hopetoun and Geraldton, roads and bridges, clearing and construction of main and feeder roads in the wheat belt, town water supplies, and drainage and irrigation. In 1909 and 1910 he had also been consulting engineer to the Fremantle Harbour Trust and the Bunbury Harbour Board.

In 1913 Thompson visited Berlin and reported on trials of the Mueller road trains. He inspected the Giovi electric railway near Genoa, and river works in Britain and Europe. In Canada he studied the wheat handling system. He had been elected a member of the Institution of Civil Engineers, London, in 1899 and became founding president of the Western Australian Institution of Engineers in 1910.

In 1924 Thompson advised his intention to retire. The position of engineer-in-chief was advertised with 200 applicants. Thompson's retirement was delayed until February 1925 as H J Deane, the successful applicant, did not take up the position.

Although Thompson contributed evidence to over 10 parliamentary enquiries his only known published paper is: Inaugural Presidential Address, Proceedings of the Western Australian Institution of Engineers, 1, 1910.

On 6 March 1920 at Christ Church, Claremont, Perth, Thompson had married divorcee, Constanza Georgina Hardwicke, née Staszewski, who predeceased him in 1940. Survived by his son Thomas and stepson Sidney Rawnsley Hardwicke, he died on 2 January 1945 at his home in Ord Street West Perth and was buried in the Presbyterian section of Karrakatta cemetery.

Thompson had a keen interest in sailing and was for many years the starter at Royal Freshwater Yacht Club having been elected to the committee in 1898. He was made a life member of that club in 1931. His houses at 59 Brisbane Street Perth and at 52 The Esplanade, Peppermint Grove were named "Rostrevor" after the village in County Down, Northern Ireland.

Thompson has been acknowledged with a plaque in St Georges Terrace for the year 1925.

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ENGINEERS AUSTRALIA WA DIVISION 100th ANNIVERSARY
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